

## **Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Mar 4th 2017**

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

Today's Gospel tells about a meal that Levi hosted for his tax collector friends and Jesus and his disciples. Why this behavior of Jesus and his followers should be so shocking to the Pharisees and their scribes is largely lost on us contemporary readers. What we are missing is that sharing a meal was a very intimate activity in first-century Palestine. One didn't share a meal casually; eating with others was a sign of friendship. What's more, for a Jew to eat with people who were considered "unclean" because they didn't keep the Mosaic law was absolutely taboo. And tax collectors—because they worked in the service of the occupying Roman forces—were definitely unclean. And "sinners" here was a label of anyone who didn't keep the Mosaic law. So by eating with these outcasts, Jesus and his disciples rendered themselves technically unclean.

The gospels make it clear that this was a deliberate practice of Jesus; it was really a prophetic symbol. It becomes clear in Luke 15 that Jesus was using this stunningly inclusive practice to demonstrate the hospitality of the Father welcoming sinners to the forgiveness of being invited into the kingdom that Jesus was inaugurating in his earthly ministry. It is interesting to note that Luke changes Mark's wording describing the complaint of the Pharisees and their scribes: whereas Mark says that they ask the disciples why Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners, Luke says that they ask the disciples, "Why do you [plural] eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners." That subtle adjustment likely means that Luke is alluding to the practice of Christians of his day continuing the practice of their Lord. The takeaway for us is twofold: not only are we sinners invited to share the table of the Lord in Eucharist; we are called to extend hospitality and welcome to include those considered outsiders, strangers and aliens in our communities. In the last speech of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, he puts it this way: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (syn?gagete me). The Greek word reminds us of the community dimension of the welcome. This can help us think about the Christian approach to immigrants and refugees.

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